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COMMITTEE ON NATURAL RESOURCES
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ADOPTION OF THE REPORT OF THE COMMITTEE ON ITS THIRD SESSION

Draft report

Addendum

Rapporteur: Mr. Mohammad Nawaz KHAN

Chapter

B. Water

[Note: To be inserted between section A, "General", and section C, "Minerals"; see E/C.7/1996/2/Add.1.]

1. During its discussions, the Committee made the observations reported below.

2. Since the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED), a range of detailed studies and assessments of the role of water in societies, their economies and the environments upon which they depend has led to a more precise definition of the critical issues facing water resources management. The comprehensive assessment of the world's freshwater resources, to be submitted to the General Assembly at its special session in 1997 through the Commission on Sustainable Development, constitutes an important first step in the ongoing assessment of the state of the world's water resources. None the less, despite the warnings of an impending water crisis made at several major international conferences, such as the United Nations Water Conference in 1977 and the International Conference on Water and the Environment and UNCED in 1992, there has been a general inability to take appropriate action for dealing with such a crisis.

3. The driving forces behind increasingly serious water problems include rapid world population growth - in terms of both rapid urbanization and rural populations growing beyond local carrying capacity - and rising expectations and dependence on reliable water-related services to meet social needs, economic activity and food production. The current water crisis should also be broadly seen as one arising from inadequate socio-economic responses to biophysical constraints. As a result of past and present land and water mismanagement, inter alia, the water resource base in several regions has become critically limited in relation to centres of demand; water quality is experiencing overall degradation, with a resulting breakdown in public health and agricultural productivity; the impact of extreme hydrological events, such as floods and droughts, has been exacerbated by land mismanagement; and groundwater in particular has been overutilized as a source of water and a sink for effluents and other land-based pollutants.

4. In addition, new insights have emerged into the regional distribution of population, particularly in terms of per capita income, water availability and use. The current situation has serious implications for the patterns of economic growth and food security in several regions of the world: water may well become a limiting factor for economic and social development in many of the poorer countries of the world. Current data also indicate that about two thirds of the population living in low-income countries are already facing conditions of vulnerability, stress and scarcity. In fact, what has often been referred to as a global water crisis is now increasingly seen as a series of worsening regional or local crises with global implications. As far as the freshwater resources of the world are concerned, the concept "Think regionally, act locally" will thus become more effective than the concept "Think globally, act locally", which was coined at a time when focus was concentrated on phenomena in the global atmosphere.

5. Managing the increasing water scarcity problem will need to combine concern for economic efficiency with concern for social equity. Wherever scarcity is a result of inefficient water use, demand management and change in crop production patterns must provide solutions. Wherever countries are already using more water than is environmentally sustainable, fundamental changes in production and consumption patterns will be required, with implications for world trade and other areas. The efficient management and use of rainwater and soil moisture is essential in drought-prone areas, in addition to which water quality degradation is becoming an even more serious problem in many countries and regions.

6. There is also an increasing concern that current trends to decentralize and privatize the delivery of water services are likely to result in water becoming a private good at the expense of recognizing the crucial social value of water. In some countries, the legal framework being proposed would allow the sale of water rights, which could result in monopolies and hoarding of water rights without the recognition of historical uses or a requirement for beneficial use. If water markets are to be implemented, they should fit into the wider scope of national socio-economic policies and should respect environmental requirements.

7. In sum, urgent action is called for in the following areas, among others:

(a) Greater integration of national socio-economic development strategies with water-related biophysical constraints, with particular emphasis on food security imperatives;

(b) Emphasis on new dimensions of demand management, such as more efficient consumption and production patterns, comparative advantages in the context of the global economy, and more efficient mechanisms for allocating water among different uses;

(c) Promotion of an intersectoral approach to land-use and water resources management.

Draft resolution II. Integrated water resources development and management

[Note: To be inserted after draft resolution entitled "Integration of key minerals issues into the implementation of Agenda 21", which will become draft resolution I; see E/C.7/1996/L.2/Add.1.]

The Economic and Social Council,

Recalling General Assembly resolution 32/158 of 19 December 1977, in which the Assembly approved the Mar del Plata Action Plan, 1/

Recalling also the recommendations related to water resources contained in Agenda 21, 2/ which was adopted by the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development, and the decisions concerning water resources made by the Commission on Sustainable Development at its second session, in 1994,

Recalling further General Assembly resolution 50/126 of 20 December 1995 concerning water supply and sanitation,

Bearing in mind the outcome of the Intergovernmental Conference to Adopt a Global Programme of Action for the Protection of the Marine Environment from Land-based Activities, which was held in Washington, D.C., from 23 October to 3 November 1995,

1. Takes note of the work being undertaken on the comprehensive assessment of the freshwater resources of the world;

2. Notes with concern the lack of significant progress made by Governments in addressing the urgent issues identified in Agenda 21; 2/

3. Takes note with appreciation of the inter-sessional strategy paper of the Committee on Natural Resources on future water resources management issues and appropriate strategies and policies, 3/ which contains an analysis of pressing issues with worldwide implications in the field of water resources;

4. Reaffirms the concept of water as a scarce and vulnerable resource needed for the integrated development and management of land and

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1/ Report of the United Nations Water Conference, Mar del Plata, 14-25 March 1977 (United Nations publication, Sales No. E.77.II.A.12), chap.I.

2/ Report of the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development, Rio de Janeiro, 3-14 June 1992, vol. I, Resolutions Adopted by the Conference (United Nations publication, Sales No. E.93.I.8 and corrigendum), resolution 1, annex II.

3/ E/C.7/1996/6.

water resources in the framework of the national planning process, including linkages to economic and social objectives, land and ocean resources;

5. Recommends that Governments adopt measures designed to improve the efficient use of water resources in the context of sustainable production and consumption patterns and the growing importance of world trade;

6. Recommends that Governments take urgent action to assign the highest priority to the formulation and implementation of policies for the management of water resources in large cities and towns; water resources requirements for food production relative to other needs; accelerating significantly the rate of progress in the provision of water-supply and sanitation, particularly for the urban and rural poor; the control of pollution from land-based sources, sewage and effluents; and the protection of groundwater from overutilization and pollution;

7. Also recommends that Governments, in accordance with their national policies and priorities and with the aid of the international community, take appropriate measures for enhancing national and regional self-sufficiency with regard to the financing, operation and maintenance of water resources projects, and that they take measures to enhance their institutional, legal and technical capabilities in the area of water resources, including the strengthening and, where necessary, the establishment of regional organizations;

8. Urges Governments, with the support of the organizations of the United Nations system, other multilateral and bilateral organizations, and non-governmental organizations, to consider the possibility of establishing pilot projects on river basins and regions that are deemed to be suffering from serious water-related stresses with a view to developing and implementing policies designed to avert a water crisis;

9. Also urges the organizations of the United Nations system, international financing organizations, other multilateral and bilateral organizations, and non-governmental organizations and the international community at large to give priority attention to providing Governments with technical and financial support in their efforts to deal with such problems;

10. Invites the organizations of the United Nations system to consider the findings and recommendations contained in the inter-sessional strategy paper of the Committee on Natural Resources on future water resources management issues and appropriate strategies and policies, 3/ in particular with regard to the ongoing preparation of a comprehensive assessment of the freshwater resources of the world, and invites them to give wide dissemination to the strategy paper.

Resolution 3/7. Reports in the field of water resources submitted to the Committee on Natural Resources at its fourth session

[Note: To be inserted after resolution 3/6; see E/C.7/1996/L.2/Add.1.]

The Committee on Natural Resources,

1. Takes note with appreciation of the reports of the Secretary-General on institutional and legal issues relevant to the implementation of water markets, the state of the freshwater resources of the world and preparation of implementation plans for averting the freshwater crisis; 1/

2. Also takes note with appreciation of the reports of the regional commissions on freshwater resources in their respective regions; 2/

3. Requests the Secretary-General, in close cooperation with organs and organizations of the United Nations system, to prepare a report on follow-up to the comprehensive assessment of the freshwater resources of the world, including methodological questions arising from the characterization of vulnerability and problem areas in assessing the freshwater resources of the world, for the consideration of the Committee at its fourth session;

4. Requests the Secretary-General, in consultation with the organs and organizations of the United Nations system, to prepare a report on issues related to the spatial planning of land and water resources, taking into account urban and rural development needs and food security requirements, and the protection of ecosystems.

1/ E/C.7/1996/3, 4 and 5.

2/ E/C.7/1996/13-17.